

Always keep yourself appraised of developments

There is an old saying that you are only as good as the people around you.

It's a maxim to which I readily subscribe, yet – as a business leader – I need to ensure I have taken every precaution to protect the good name of the organisation I serve.

I was at a governors' meeting recently at a local school in Birmingham and we were discussing the forthcoming school inspection. One of the governors is an ex-head-teacher and was telling us how one person having a bad day could mess up a whole inspection. Also any failure would not be attributed to this lone ranger but to the person with whom the buck ultimately stopped – the boss, or in this case the headteacher.

Although you may work as diligently as you can with all your staff, when one person gets it wrong it is the man or woman at the top who must shoulder the responsibility, if not always the blame.

You may, as I do, operate on a "need to know" basis. But, although you do not need to know every detail of what is happening in your business, your performance can sometimes be measured by relatively small, insignificant acts.

So, if the buck stops at the top and I want to measure the success of an organisation, then I should gauge the success and effectiveness of the board.

Surprisingly, however, it is not common practice to measure the board's performance. I can think of many complacent boards who have not evaluated their

performance, although I won't name names here.

Boards should be asking themselves which key items need discussing, how well papers are presented ahead of meetings, whether the chair is enlisting the best contributions from all the directors in allowing full discussions without getting involved in the minutiae.

The board should evaluate whether all the board members – executive as well as non-executive – are contributing the skills that they have to offer. Targets for performance need to be set individually, as do some form of development plan to enhance people's skills.

A board appraisal process could start with identifying what you want to achieve from such an initiative.

The objective may be to ensure that there is ultimate control over the key issues the organisation is facing –



KARL GEORGE

compliance with the ever-increasing regulatory burdens, for instance. Policies and procedures should be up to date and relevant, for example recent changes which, in April this year, brought into force most of the provisions of the Companies Act 2006.

Let's consider the Corporate Manslaughter and Corporate Homicide Act 2007. A formal boardroom review of health and safety performance is essential when you consider the potential risk. It allows the board to establish whether the essential principles have been embedded in the organisation to manage risk and protect your people.

If you are in the charitable sector, then you need to consider the Charities Act 2006 and the relatively new Charities Corp.

Having determined what is expected from the appraisal process, the type of appraisal and timescale should then be considered. Individual board members may need to be interviewed by the chair to give feedback on how they feel the board is operating, and have some evaluation of their own performance. Or will the appraisal be an away day with the help of external facilitation, or for that matter a combination of the two?

Whichever route you choose you can be sure it's not just you – but the people around you – who will help drive the business forward.

■ Karl George is managing director of KGISS and head of third sector clients at Bloomer Heaven Chartered Accountants.



Mr Brown's repeat prescription

Private sector managers will be drafted in to take over public services, according to the latest Government announcement.

It's a real blast from the past. This is the type of language we heard over the past 10 years from Tony Blair's regime.

If this announcement is new, it's remarkably similar to promises we have heard before about a no-nonsense approach to failing hospitals.

And there will inevitably be some cynicism about whether it is likely ever to actually happen.

There has been talk about bringing in private managers before, but it is a solution which appears to be avoided in practice.

However, there is one precedent, namely the use of a private company to turn around Good Hope hospital in Birmingham.

This appears to have been a success, although the hospital's fortunes did not improve dramatically until it was taken over by the NHS Trust responsible for Heartlands Hospital, in a return to public sector control.

There has been predictable and misguided criticism of the prospect that private managers could be employed by the NHS.

What matters is providing the best possible service to patients. Ideological purity cannot be an excuse for letting patients down.

No hospital will be privatised under the Government's proposals. They will remain under public ownership and they will continue to provide the same service to patients regardless of ability to pay.

It should never come as a terrible shock that public services can be run badly. Any experienced business leader would acknowledge that there are poor managers in the world of industry, so why should the public services be any different?

The latest health announcement may come as a surprise to some of Gordon Brown's MPs. But Mr Brown is arguably no less right wing than his predecessor. Some of Mr Blair's critics within the Labour Party and the trade unions forget that Mr Brown was a founder of the New Labour project, not a reluctant passenger.

However, the problem Mr Brown may well face in trying to explain his health policies to voters is that many will feel they have heard it before.

Slow progress

Deadbeats and useless - that's John Spellar's verdict on the Department for Transport.

He ought to know, as he used to be a Transport Minister himself.

Of course, the Black Country MP could have an ulterior motive for blaming delays on lousy civil servants, as it takes the blame off the politicians who employ them - namely, his Labour colleagues.

But putting such thoughts aside, one has to agree that the DfT seems to move at a different pace to the rest of us.

The delays in making a decision about the refurbishment of New Street station are the most obvious example, although one should point out in fairness that ministers blamed the city council for the delays - and the right decision was made in the end.

However, there is also the ongoing saga of the M6 widening, as the department approved the scheme, scrapped it in favour of a planned new motorway, and then announced that it was back on again.

The widening proposal is currently in limbo, again, after the DfT announced a major review into the M6 corridor, which will look at new options such as extending the Active Traffic Management scheme and building new rail lines.

Speaking of rail, there is the saga of the high speed rail line, apparently ruled out in a report by Government advisor Rod Eddington and by ministers warning of a £30 billion cost.

It now appears to be back on the agenda, after the Government announced it could be an option to increased motorway capacity. But an actual decision? Don't be silly. Transport costs a lot of money and plays an essential role in British society and the British economy, so it's important to get it right.

But it's nonetheless hard to believe that progress need to be quite as slow as it is.

Everything day

As if we weren't having enough trouble deciding on a 'British Day' following Gordon Brown's promptings, Shrewsbury MP Daniel Kawczynski has come up with an idea for a new bank holiday.

He would like one to mark the contribution of Poles to Britain.

Now no one doubts that contribution, especially during the Second World War, has been invaluable.

But follow this idea along its logical path and why not have a bank holiday to mark the contribution to this country of Pakistanis, Indians, Chinese, Hong Kong, Vietnamese, French, German, Australians, Americans etc etc. And as for the West Indies, let's celebrate it on an island-by-island basis - Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, Barbados, and so on.

It would solve the unemployment problem - every day of the year would be a bank holiday.

The Birmingham Post conforms to the newspaper industry's voluntary Code of Practice, administered by the Press Complaints Commission. If you feel we have made an error in a report, or have fallen below our usual high standards, please write in the first instance to: Marc Reeves, editor, Birmingham Post, Weaman Street, Birmingham B4 6AX. Tel:0121 234 5688. Email: marc_reeves@birminghampost.net. The PCC code of practice, along with details of how to complain, is available from Halton House, 20/23 High Holborn, London EC1N 2JD. Website www.pcc.org.uk or email complaints@pcc.org.uk Telephone: 020 7831 0022 Helpline: 0845 600 2757.

A little light reading on the train

What do you do on a long railway journey? Do you gaze vacantly out of a window, phone everyone in your address book and chat equally vacantly, or you do catch up on your reading?

The railways have, from the time they arrived in the 1830s, had a major impact on the way we behave. The telegraph system - ancestors of our telephones - would not have developed as quickly as it did without the railway lines to pin the wires to. And, you could argue, the very idea of time began with the arrival of the train. Had it not been possible to get from Birmingham to London in three hours, there would not have been the need to establish a national time zone. The two cities would have remained seven minutes apart, just as nature intended them to be.

But it was not only technology that the railways changed; they had an equally major effect on how we spend our time. Like us the Victorians looked down the barrel of an interminable train journey and considered what to do with the time. Should they discuss the Reform Bill, preen their whiskers or visit the land of nod?

The railway companies were just as aware that their customers had time on their hands, and spotted an opportunity to sell them something.

Given that anyone travelling by train would (presumably) be interested in railways, first out of the block were specialised railway weekly magazines - Virgin still produces a similar kind of publication today - with the latest on current railway issues and new developments on the track.

But the appeal of bogies and gauges is a limited one. Not everyone who travelled by train wanted to know how a steam engine worked.

In 1848 WH Smith was given exclusive



CHRIS UPTON

rights for the selling of books and newspapers on the London to Birmingham sector of the London & North Western Railway, and within half a century Smith's had cornered the market for reading across the nation, with 777 book stalls on railway platforms.

It was a highly lucrative business. Victorian travellers, being acutely aware of the subtle art of social engagement - when to engage in small talk, when to remain tight lipped and when to take offence - found it much simpler to bury themselves in a book and avoid the whole thing. Which book should they choose from the book stall?

Edward Gibbons' *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* would be a worthy choice, as would something by John Stuart Mill. And then there was Carlyle's *Essay on Burns*. But somehow life seemed too short for any of these. How about a novel?

It did not take long for the (self-appointed) arbiters of taste to spot that something was going wrong in the nation's reading habits. In an article for the *Times* in 1851 Samuel Phillips deplored the "store-houses of positively injurious ailment for hungry minds" being touted from the station bookstall. British culture may already have been going down the tubes, but now the casual observer (who ought to have had his head buried in a book) could see this all too clearly.

In a typically Victorian display of snobism, any author who found himself or herself being sold on the railway platform shivered at the thought.

And so, while the long train journey stimulated more reading in the country than had ever been seen before, the nation perversely agonised that they were doing the wrong kind of reading. That's the British way for you.

■ Dr Chris Upton is reading Wittgenstein at Newman University College in Birmingham.

Be bold and brave Liam, and set out full details of plans

LETTERS: post.letters@birminghampost.net

Dear Editor, I read with interest Jonathan Walker's article (New boys set out the way forward for Labour, *Birmingham Post*, 3rd April).

Though it clearly shows that a new generation for the Labour Party is available should they be bold enough to take a generational leap forward, one wonders if they have the energy or willpower to do this.

The article, however, attracted my attention in respect of Liam Byrne MP. At a time when nationally and locally (for which Liam Byrne is associated with both) the Labour Party is mistrusted by the electorate, he within the article compounds this mistrust with dishonesty towards the people of the West Midlands. Jonathan Walker's article implies that Mr Byrne has written and produced a policy document for the Labour party which to me sounds suspiciously like the challenge he made back in August 2007. At that time he called on the people of the West Midlands whether they be civic, business, community or education leaders, and to quote Liam Byrne to "Be bold, be brave" and have input in an "Action Plan" for the West Midlands. One hundred and fifty days was set by Liam himself for consultation with those who took an interest. However, we the electorate have seen no evidence of this consultation or document. But surprisingly we read (care of *The Birmingham Post's* own Political Editor) that a document of this nature is to be placed before Labour's own National Executive Committee.

Call me suspicious, but when a Minister particularly in his capacity of being the West Midlands Regional Minister calls for consultation and then places his findings before his own party's national executive in a document sited as a Labour party

consultation document. I tend to get the feeling that something is not quite right!

For the sake of transparency and good old fashioned honesty, Liam Byrne must put on record that these are two different consultation exercises and declare that no government money has gone into the Labour party consultation document which he is placing before his own party's governing executive.

I believe he should go further and publish his 150-day consultation as to show the difference between the two documents, in Liam Byrne's own words, it time for him to "be bold, be brave".

For him not to clarify, only leads to further mistrust of both the government and of Liam personally.

Paul Burke
Holbeche Road
Sutton Coldfield
Birmingham



Liam Byrne MP

What do you think? Contact details are at the bottom of the facing page



Why Tata deal could be good news for the environment

Dear Editor, The deal to sell car maker Jaguar Land Rover to Indian conglomerate Tata was completed this week.

This represents a success story for a West Midlands car industry that has too often suffered hard times. I would like to congratulate everyone, at every level, who were involved in making the sale a reality. Joining together these two famous British car brands and their new Indian owner will save thousands of jobs in our region.

Before the deal was completed I travelled to India to speak to Tata executives.

We had a full and frank discussion about how the company might meet climate change obligations.

I have been working hard with other MEPs and the government to reach a compromise.

We are only too aware of the support

the industry needs on this issue: our aim is to ensure that JLR receives the necessary assistance that will enable it to remain the dynamic car maker it has always been.

We will make progress on climate change with the co-operation of all parties, which will include Tata's funding of research and development into more efficient cars for the future

Tata now has the opportunity to show just how successful Indian businesses can be, but will only do so in partnership with its employees. Through working together, this new enterprise will flourish. I wish them every success for the future, and hope this is just the beginning of renewed investment interest in our talented region.

Neena Gill
Labour MEP for the West Midlands

Why is colour an issue?

Dear Editor, Most of the media covered about the race to the White House invariably refers to Democratic presidential hopeful Barack Obama as "black" (Post, June 4).

Given that most US "blacks" are at least 80 per cent European by ancestry, at what point do we stop using that term and start calling them "white"?

There are people in the UK who have found that they have African blood from over 200 years ago who look European in every sense of the word. Equally, there are people of European descent (particularly in the Afrikaner part of South Africa) who look decidedly Mediterranean. Yet they are classed as White.

I believe it is long overdue for the media to drop these largely pointless and potentially sectarian labels. The coverage of the US Presidential race ought to be on whether candidates can deliver key policy issues such as peace in the Middle East.

Yours faithfully,
Chris Youett,
Coventry

What is so wrong with failure?

Dear Editor. It is said that over 80 per cent of small business start ups fail in the first year!"

I am thoroughly fed up with everyone using this same line.

It is said by whom? For the life of me I have not found where these people get their information from.

Is this supposed to encourage people to start businesses? Don't you feel sorry for the poor budding entrepreneur?

In America, most serious entrepreneurs have had one or two failed businesses in their past, they see them as steps in the right direction towards getting the big one.

Sadly, this entrepreneurial spirit is looked down upon in this country; we would see them as "too big a risk", in reality, the experience that they'll have gained will have taught them not to make the same mistakes again. I would call them a "better bet"!

I am a "glass half full character"; a believer in positive thinking and I say, "if you believe it will happen and if you can see yourself in that picture, then you will be successful".

I have heard people say to me, "It didn't work because I'm just unlucky!"

I say there is no such thing as luck. A successful business person is someone who'll go that bit further than others by doing the things that others don't like to do and to keep doing it until it becomes second nature to them. So if you want to sell those widgets get on that phone and "smile and dial".

Pat Sutton
Operations Director of
Advantage Business Angels
and a Certified NLP Practitioner

Are we too obsessed with failure? Have you failed and survived? Let us know what you think at post.letters@birminghampost.net